

THE BRYSON INCIDENT

by

Captain R. G. K. Williamson

Bryson was a squat, broad shouldered, evil looking man, with a face that mirrored his violent nature. His nose was mis-shapen in an extraordinary way and somehow gave his appearance a touch of insanity. During his youth he acquired a reputation for bullying and brawling. His name became well known to the R.U.C. through his criminal activities and when "the troubles" began in 1969 Bryson readily joined the Provisional I.R.A. He came from a fiercely Republican family and was more than grateful for the opportunity to indulge his homicidal tendencies.

During the escalation of insurrection in Belfast in 1971 Bryson developed into a cunning ruthless killer. His reputation was greatly enhanced by a spectacular escape from the prison ship Maidstone when he and six others swam the icy January waters to freedom. Although Bryson was known throughout Belfast he operated mainly in the Ballymurphy area where his crude leadership and shooting exploits made him the object of a cult following. He probably reached the peak of his power and notoriety during the truce period in June, 1972. He took command of the Ballymurphy Provisional Company and exercised absolute control over the people living in the area. He ruled by a system of terror which demanded and got universal obedience. He was also extremely active himself and is known to have shot a number of soldiers and policemen personally. The weapon he invariably used for sniping was an Armalite rifle with a telescopic sight. When he was finally caught in November '72 it brought considerable relief to the Security Forces. However in March '73 he made an audacious escape from Crumlin Road Court House.

At about this time another Provisional was creating something of a reputation, Patrick Mulvenna, who had been Bryson's adjutant became the O.C. of the Ballymurphy. In the meantime Bryson went South with a fellow fugitive called Frank Duffy who was also a notorious Ballymurphy Provisional. Whilst in Eire they were both charged with robbing a bank in Dublin and Bryson was subsequently expelled from the Provisional Movement because he recognised the Court. In their absence Mulvenna rapidly began to acquire the same sort of charisma as Bryson by escaping the clutches of the Army on two occasions and shooting several soldiers.

The arrival of 3 R.G.J. in July coincided with the embryonic beginnings of a step-up in the ever present friction between the Official and Provisional I.R.A. In the Ballymurphy, which was taken over by "S" Company, the Officials, under the leadership of Ronald Bunting, the renegade son of Major Bunting, Ian Paisley's right hand man, were

particularly militant. The rate of "Security-Forces-Not-Involved" shootings rose weekly under the interested attentions of "S" Company. "Kneecapping" was the most common outcome of a system of mutual reprisal operated by the two I.R.A. wings. "S" Company achieved a very high rate of weapon finds and arrests and generally asserted their presence without receiving the normal acrimony associated with the practice of "dominating" the area.

Besides possessing good sources one of the chief methods used by "S" Company to collect tactical intelligence and maintain general surveillance on the area was the use of O.P.s. There would often be three and sometimes four O.P.s overlooking different parts of the area. On the morning of 31st August a corporal and a rifleman climbed stealthily into the attic of a flat directly above the infamous Bullring. A hole in the roof, caused by some missing tiles, afforded them a good view of the Bullring and roads leading off it. The position itself was cramped and allowed little movement for shooting. The corporal and the rifleman settled down stoically to their task.

At the beginning of August Bryson, despite his expulsion, was asked by the Provisional Brigade Staff to return to the Ballymurphy and help redress the balance against the Officials. He accepted the invitation and moved North with Frank Duffy. In similar fashion to Bunting he set about terrorising the local Officials. In one celebrated incident he lined several of them up at gunpoint against a wall, inside a drinking club, and then proceeded to spray the roof with an Armalite rifle on automatic fire. The implications of this were not lost on the Officials who decided that Bryson would have to be executed. They convened a meeting a week later at which they discussed how and who should carry this out. Brian Trainor, anxious to make an impression on his older colleagues, volunteered to be part of the execution party. His offer was quickly accepted but his enthusiasm dwindled significantly when he found that he alone was the execution party.

It was the corporal's turn "on stag". His bones were beginning to ache slightly. Neither he nor the rifleman had seen anything of particular interest; it was now 18.30 hours. During the course of the day he had frequently expected to be discovered by the free ranging children of the Ballymurphy. With a long suffering sigh he glanced out of the hole and mechanically began to take notice of an olive green Hillman Hunter at the bottom of Ballymurphy Road. It was travelling at an even speed towards the Bullring. Suddenly to the corporal's astonishment he noticed three rifles sticking out of the windows. As the car reached the Bullring it began to sound its horn at regular intervals. Frantically the corporal began to report what he was seeing whilst at the same time reaching for his rifle. The car made one circuit and drove off down Glenalina Road before the corporal could even point his rifle out of the hole. He began to interpret the details of the after images still imprinted on his mind. There had been four men, three rifles: One armalite, a garrand and

something else. He quickly reported further details to Zero hoping to alert other O.P.s and foot patrols.

A short time before this Brian Trainor, the young Official Volunteer, had set out from a house in the Ballymurphy with a "grease gun". His orders were to shoot Bryson on sight. Even now he was walking nervously round the bottom of Glenalina Road with the "grease gun" concealed under his "noisy jacket" desperately regretting his earlier rash decision to accept the assignment and hoping against hope he wouldn't see Bryson.

The green Hillman was reported by another O.P. as moving round the area followed by a red van. The corporal and the rifleman were tense as they listened to the radio net and strained their eyes for the possible reappearance of the car. They began to be attacked by feelings of self-doubt. Were there weapons or weren't there?

Brian Trainor suddenly stopped in his tracks as the big Hillman Hunter swept round the corner. He made out the unmistakable features of Jim Bryson and saw rifles sticking out of the windows. An instant assessment of the odds and discretion being the better part of valour he darted into an alleyway and tried to erase what he'd just seen from his mind. With his pulse racing madly he then ran back to the house he'd set out from faster than he had ever run before.

What in fact was happening was that Bryson, Paddy Mulvenna, Bimbo O'Rawe and Frank Duffy were driving around the Ballymurphy partly to show their disregard for the Army and partly to humiliate the Officials.

Despite his vigilance the corporal was taken by surprise when the car coasted quietly across the Bullring followed by the Red van. They stopped at the junction of Ballymurphy Road and Whitecliffe Parade. The occupants casually got out and Bryson began to direct them to ambush positions. The corporal gingerly pushed one of the tiles in front of him to one side so as to get a better view and also to enable him to create a cramped fire position. Suddenly one of the loose tiles clattered across the roof and crashed to the ground alerting the attention of the ambush group, one of whom fired in the general direction of the O.P. The corporal immediately returned four rounds, although he could scarcely aim. He was forced to pull his rifle in when it developed a stoppage. During this interval the ambush party must have returned to their cars and left because when the corporal looked again there was no one there. Having given their position away the corporal and rifleman set about enlarging the hole by kicking other tiles out. The corporal put his head out to try and get a better view of what had happened. He withdrew it sharply as two rounds hit the roof. He fired three quick shots at a gunman he caught a glimpse of behind one of the houses to his front, but missed. It now seemed clear that the car and the van had gone. The rifleman hurriedly packed their kit. Just as they were leaving the corporal

was amazed to see the green Hillman Hunter emerging from Whitecliffe Parade and turning right on to Ballymurphy Road. Ironically Bryson had become confused by the problem that had so often enabled him to escape unscathed from his own sniping attacks in the past, that of determining where the fire had come from. He had thrown the car into a wild "U" turn in Whitecliffe Parade because he thought it was leading him towards danger. As they turned into Ballymurphy Road, Paddy Mulvenna fired two shots from his Armalite rifle. The corporal pressed his eye to the telescopic sight of his S.L.R. and began firing rapidly at the back of the accelerating Hillman Hunter. He had to compensate for the first shots which went low left and then fired seven more shots at the retreating car trying to incapacitate it before it reached the corner.

Inside the car the four gunmen were writhing in hysterical panic. O'Rawe, who was sitting behind Bryson, the driver, was slammed into the front seat as a bullet ripped into his left shoulder. Duffy, sitting behind Mulvenna, grovelled on the floor at the back. Looking up he saw the sight which haunted him for weeks, Bryson's head was jerked forward with a dull thump as a 7.62 entered the back of his neck. He slumped forward over the steering wheel as the car careered into the garden of 99 Ballymurphy Road. The three others cowered in the bottom of the car temporarily immobilised with shock.

The corporal and the rifleman observed the crashed car two hundred metres away for a moment and then jumped down from the attic into the flats below, where they took up fire positions to cover the car. By this stage "S" Company foot patrols were closing in on the gun battle. Impulsively Mulvenna flung open the door of the car and rolled onto the ground. He was now aware of where the shooting was coming from and fired a long burst on automatic at the O.P. with his Armalite. Duffy raised the M.1 carbine given to him earlier by Bryson and began to fire from the back of the car. Mulvenna then decided to get up and go. As he did so the corporal fired three shots, two of which hit, and Mulvenna died instantly. As he changed his magazine he saw Bimbo O'Rawe clutching a Garand running towards the front door of number 99 Ballymurphy Road. Again he fired three shots, hitting O'Rawe as he pitched forward inside the house. Meanwhile Duffy had scrambled out of the car and was sprinting towards the alleyway between 95 and 97 Ballymurphy Road. The corporal fired a final three shots but missed.

When the "S" Company foot patrols reached the car accompanied by the corporal and rifleman from the O.P. they found Mulvenna dead, Bryson deeply unconscious and O'Rawe badly wounded in the back garden of 99 Ballymurphy Road.

The Ballymurphy was stunned by what had happened. As they crowded round the scene they stood mesmerised by the sight of the bodies being taken away. An unannounced amnesty seemed to exist whilst life saving actions were carried out on O'Rawe and Bryson. Violent animosity against the Army was inexplicably absent until voices

were heard saying "The Stickies done this". Mulvenna was buried a week later, Bryson died on 22nd September and O'Rawe, despite being hit five times, recovered. The obituaries of the first two referring to "Enemies of Ireland" rather than "Crown Forces" underlined the popular notion that they died as a result of an Official I.R.A. ambush.

The achievement of "S" Company was in itself highly valuable. It destroyed arguably the best Provisional A.S.U. in Belfast and disposed of two of the most wanted and dangerous men in Northern Ireland. The effect of these deaths was to deal a severely demoralising blow to the Provisional Campaign. Total war between the Provisionals and the Officials was only avoided by strenuous combined efforts of restraint by the Brigade Staffs of the two respective wings. It initiated a highly charged confrontation which lasted several weeks. This caused the I.R.A. to become acutely introspective and therefore ineffective against the Security Forces at a time when the Government, engrossed in the delicate negotiations to form an executive from the Assembly, were anxious not to be seen to be giving leeway to the Army to help it fight the terrorist.

In the Ballymurphy one of the first blows in the ensuing "O.I.R.A./P.I.R.A. Feud" came shortly after the shooting. Information was supplied by a Provisional source which led to the discovery of a "grease gun" and a Thompson machine gun. Also in the house where they were found was a certain Brian Trainor. His immediate arrest completed, for him, a very bad day.